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The Identity Regulation of Romantic Partners

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Abstract

Virtually no research has examined how individuals act to protect or enhance the identities of close others. Participants presented a romantic partner to an audience who was either aware or unaware of their partners' past positive and negative personality feedback on two desirable traits. Participants also rated the validity of the positive and negative feedback and how important the traits were to their partner. Results indicated that participants highly connected to their partner presented their partner more favorably than those slightly connected primarily when the audience was aware of the partners' past performance. For the trait relevant to the negative feedback, participants who were less competitive with their partner denounced the validity of the feedback, said the desirable trait was still important to their partner, and actually presented their partner more favorably on the trait than those who were highly competitive.

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Introduction

Consider the following examples: (A) Linda is fired from her job as an attorney. Her husband Bill stresses that the economy is poor, and that Linda possesses the skills to go out and find another, more enjoyable job. (B) The wife of a United States congressman announces on television that the bouncing of 200 checks was her fault, not her husband's, because she handles the finances. © Partners on morning news programs brag about one another's unique blend of caring and intelligence.

What do the preceding examples all have in common? In each case an individual is actively attempting to regulate the image of a close other. That is, the individual's efforts are geared toward presenting the other in the best possible light. In social life, people frequently help others achieve identity-relevant goals (Goffman, 1959; Schlenker, 1980). Close friends and romantic partners, through the ways they interpret and explain each other's behavior, are constantly influencing the identities of one another (Britt, 1994; Britt & Schlenker, 1993; Schlenker, Britt, & Pennington, in press; Schlenker & Weigold, 1992).

Despite the pervasiveness and importance of these phenomena, Schlenker and Weigold (1992) noted that virtually no research has been devoted to examining how people manage the identities of those who are close to them, or the implications of such behavior for the well-being of the relationship. The purpose of the present research was to begin to examine how individuals regulate the images of people who are close to them. Specifically, we examine how aspects of the relationship between romantic partners influence how they present their partner to an audience and assign causality for their partner's success and failure. We expected that individuals who felt more connected to and less competitive with their partner would be more likely to come to the aid of their partner with strategic "other-presentation" when the partner was in acute social need.

Method

Participants were fifty-five students taking Introductory Psychology, and the romantic partners of these students (total $N = 110$). Participants were told they would participate in two studies, one involving the determinants of friendship, and the other involving the impact of personality on impression formation and social interaction. Participants then completed the Relationship Quality Questionnaire (RQQ; Schlenker & Britt, 1994), along with other questionnaires. The RQQ is designed to measure seven different facets of relationships. For the present paper, we focus on connectedness, the degree to which the individual sees the partner as an extension of self, and competitiveness, the tendency to compete with the partner in activities and tasks.

Participants were "randomly" paired with their romantic partner, and were told they would provide written information about their partner to another subject (same sex as the partner) after receiving personality feedback about their partner. Participants then received positive feedback about their partner on one trait and negative feedback on another (the traits were open-mindedness and trustworthiness, with the traits on which participants received positive and negative feedback being counterbalanced). Participants were told that the person the partner was interacting with was either aware or unaware of the feedback about their partner. Participants then presented their partner to the audience on an Impression Questionnaire on statements that were relevant to the positive and negative feedback, and that were irrelevant to the feedback. Participants then completed questions assessing the perceived validity of the positive and negative feedback and how important each trait was to the partner's sense of self.

The design of the present study was a 2 (awareness; aware versus unaware of feedback) X 3 (feedback; positive, negative, or irrelevant Impression Questionnaire items) mixed-model factorial. The first independent variable was between-participants, and the second was within-participants. Participants were randomly assigned to conditions.

Results

Standard multiple regression was used to test for the interaction between the relationship variables and the manipulated variables. "High" and "low" levels of the relationship variables were identified by computing estimate scores for points ± 1 SD from the mean. A three-way interaction between connectedness, awareness, and feedback ($p < .05$) was obtained on the favorability of partner presentation. As seen in Figure 1a, when the audience was aware of the partner's prior performance, participants who were high in connectedness presented their partner more favorably on the positive and irrelevant traits than did participants low in private connectedness. However, as seen in Figure 1b, when the audience was not aware of the prior performance, no differences in degree of connectedness emerged.

A competitiveness X feedback interaction ($p < .05$; see Figure 2) revealed that participants high in competitiveness presented their partner in line with the feedback they received about their partner. However, participants low in competitiveness were less likely to lower their presentation of their partner on the basis of negative feedback. A competitiveness X feedback interaction on ratings of test validity ($p < .01$; see Figure 3) also revealed that participants high in competitiveness evidenced little difference in ratings of the validity of the test relevant to the positive versus negative feedback, whereas those low in competitiveness rated the test relevant to the positive feedback as much more valid than the test relevant to the negative feedback. Finally, a competitiveness X feedback interaction on ratings of trait importance ($p < .05$; see Fig. 4) illustrated that those who were high in competitiveness rated the trait relevant to the negative feedback as less important to the partner than those low in competitiveness.

Conclusions

The results suggest that when the partner was in social need (the audience was aware of negative feedback), participants high in connectedness were more likely than those low in connectedness to come to the aid of their partner through strategic presentation of information designed to portray their partner in a desirable light. The results also indicate that participants high and low in competitiveness dealt with the negative feedback they received about their partner in different ways. Participants high in competitiveness rated the test relevant to the negative feedback as more valid, said the trait was unimportant to the partner, and actually presented their partner more unfavorably on the trait. In sharp contrast, participants low in competitiveness denigrated the validity of the test relevant to the negative feedback, said the trait was indeed important to the partner, and presented their partner more favorably on the dimension relevant to the feedback. The results have implications for the areas of identity regulation, close relationships, symbolic interactionism, and models of self-evaluation.

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Figure 1A: Favorability of presentation as a function of private connectedness, awareness, and feedback-relevance

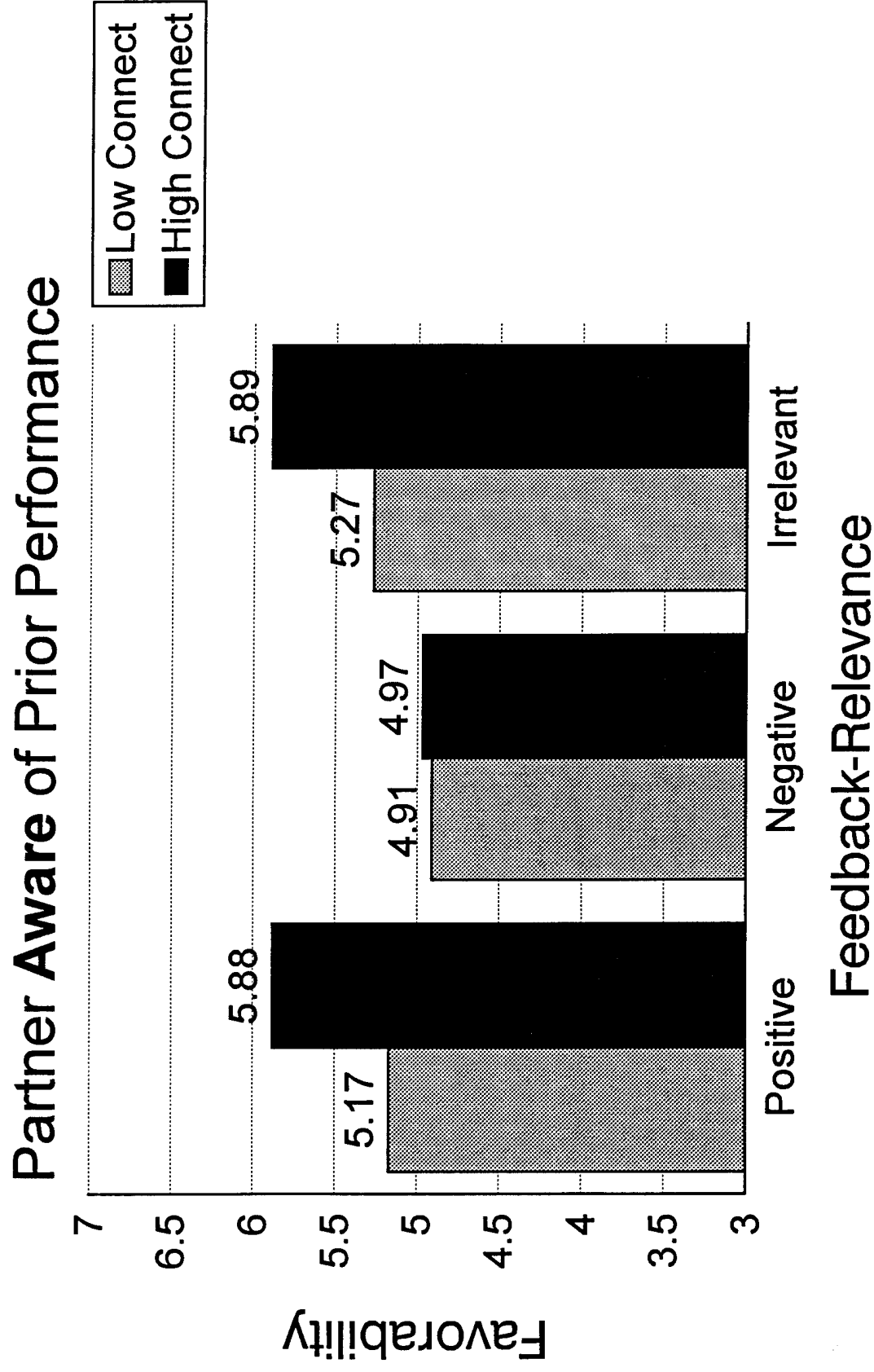


Figure 1B: Favorability of presentation as a function of private connectedness, awareness, and feedback-relevance

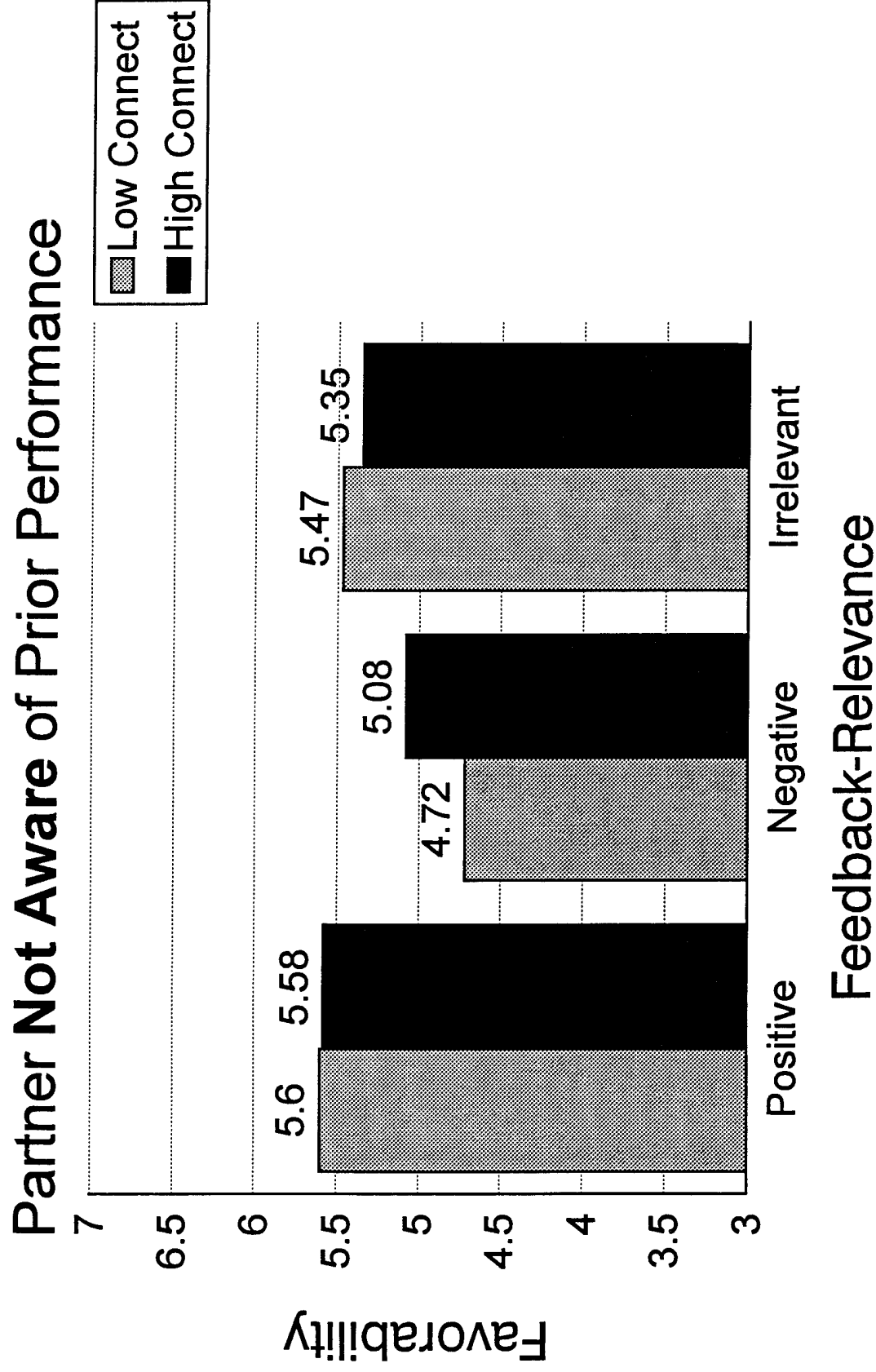


Figure 2: Favorability of partner presentation as a function of competitiveness and feedback-relevance

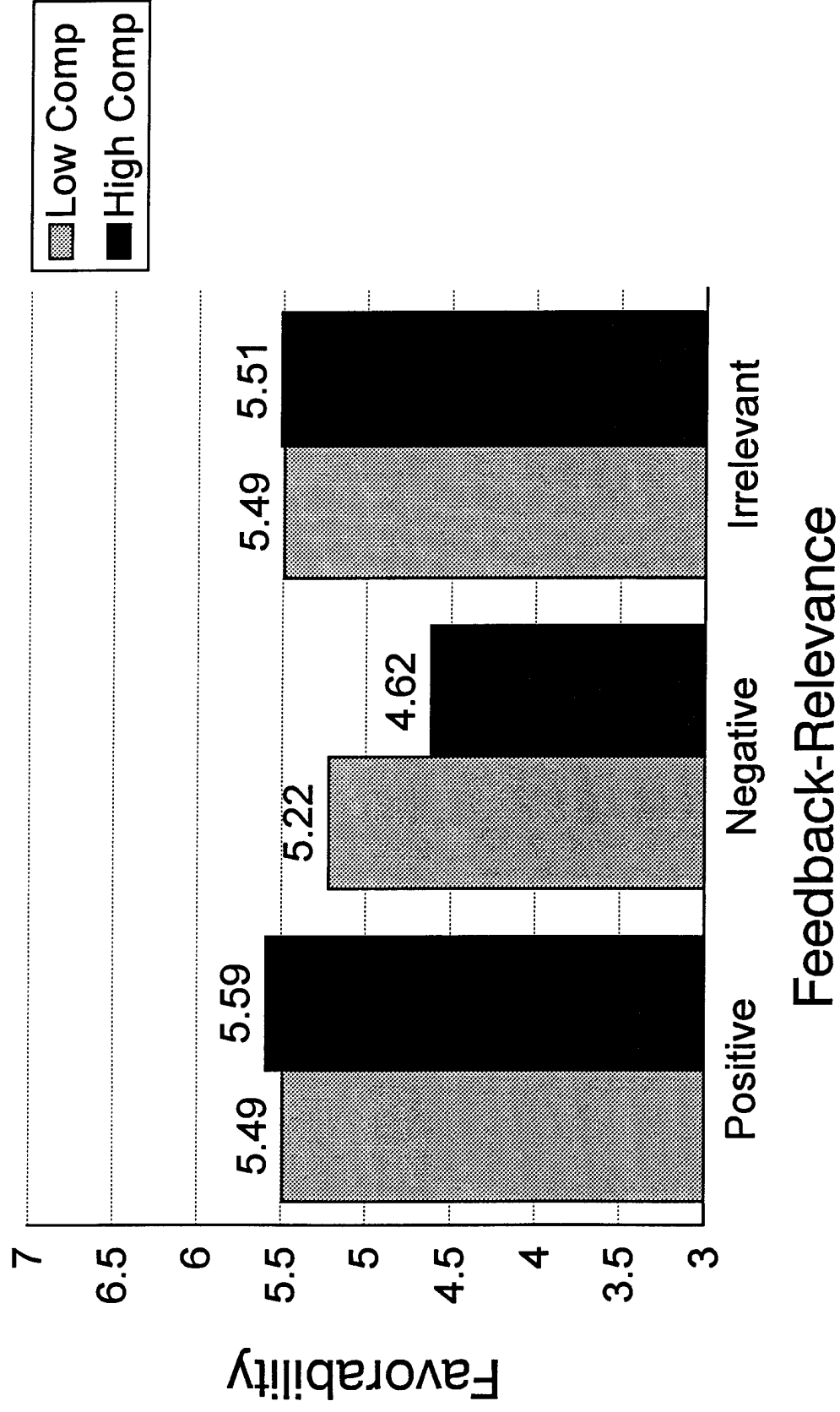


Figure 3: Ratings of test validity as a function of competitiveness and feedback

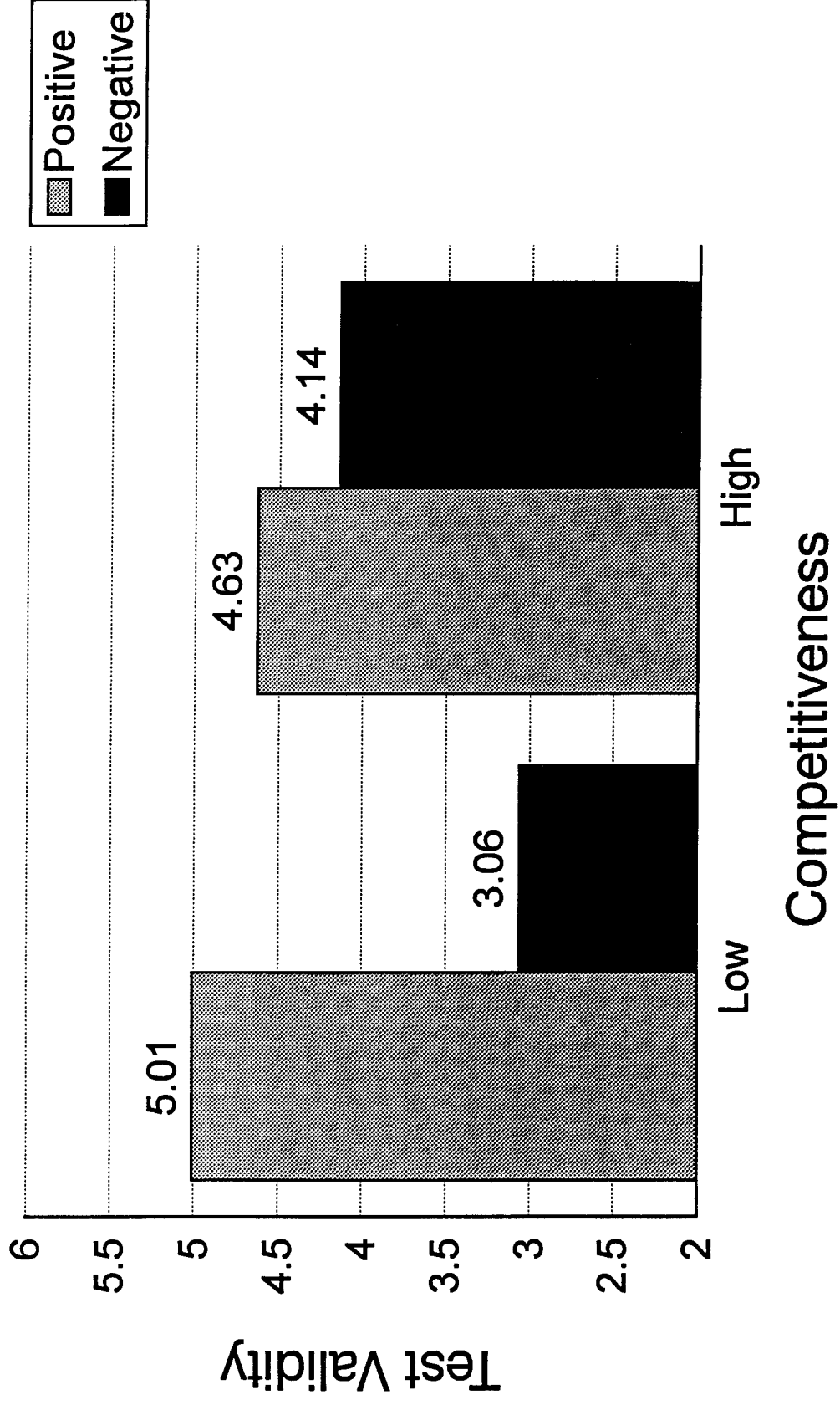


Figure 4: Ratings of trait importance as a function of competitiveness and feedback

